

Professional Networking 101

Whether you're a student, professional, or entrepreneur, having a strong network can make a world of difference when it comes to achieving your goals. While professional networking is often associated with job hunting, its benefits are numerous: in addition to career opportunities, your professional network may offer business leads, knowledge resources, and even lasting friendships.

So what exactly is professional networking? Put simply, it's the process of deliberately building and maintaining relationships with others in your professional sphere. In the "[Networking to Get Ahead](#)" lesson, Sadhana Hall shares this insight:

To be the best at what you do, you need to surround yourself with people who inspire you, who motivate you, and who challenge you. People who ask you difficult questions and provide honest feedback. Networking is the practice of intentionally seeking out these people...it's just as tangible and necessary as your technical skills.

Professional networking involves meeting a variety of people who you may not otherwise meet or socialize with. The key is to keep an open mind: even people with whom you have little in common could turn out to be some of your most valuable connections.

HOW TO BUILD YOUR NETWORK

Keep in mind that building your professional network is a *process* that requires sincerity and dedication; it can't be done overnight. That said, there are many opportunities to establish useful relationships. For example:

- **Reach out to your personal contacts:** While they may not share your career interests, your personal contacts are extremely valuable when it comes to networking. Start by creating a list of everyone you know: friends, family, and neighbors, as well as current and past employers, coworkers, teachers, and classmates. Reach out to these people and share your goals, plans, and questions with them; chances are, they can refer you to others who may be helpful.
- **Request informational interviews:** An informational interview is a meeting to gain insight and/or advice from someone with experience in your field of interest. Unlike a job interview, you initiate and conduct the interview with someone who you hope to learn from. For helpful tips, check out our resource on [How to Have a Successful Informational Interview](#).
- **Attend conferences or formal networking events:** Industry and/or professional events present a ripe opportunity to build your network: it is perfectly acceptable to strike up a conversation with a stranger in this context. Sadhana Hall recommends the following approach: "Begin your conversation with what you know about the person or the organization, talk about your common interests, and build your conversation from there. Let them know how you can possibly help them."
- **Leverage digital networks:** Social media, such as LinkedIn and Facebook, are optimal for connecting with people who have similar professional interests and goals. A good way to start is by asking people you already know to make "digital introductions" with people you would like to network with (e.g., by email or LinkedIn message). You can also join online groups or forums to build relationships with people who share your interests.

Plus: Don't forget to join the [YALI Network face2face group](#) on Facebook to connect with like-

minded leaders and learn about important events in your community!

HOW TO MAINTAIN YOUR NETWORK

Sadhana Hall reminds us to think of a professional network as “something that is alive and requires time and attention to stay healthy and relevant.” It is not enough to call upon your contacts only when you need their help: you must also think about how you can help them. For example:

- **Pass along relevant information:** Reach out to your contacts when something reminds you of them, such as an article or event they might like. Simple gestures such as these clearly demonstrate that you are thinking of others’ needs.
- **Facilitate mutually beneficial introductions:** If you know two people who share similar interests or goals, connect them! You can facilitate an introduction in-person (if you have the opportunity), use social media such as LinkedIn, or send both parties an email. Be sure to mention how you know each person and how they might benefit from connecting.
- **Reach out in advance of a job search:** In the event that you are looking for a new job, it’s appropriate to call upon your professional network to help you. You can request job leads or relevant contacts for informational interviews, and/or seek advice from your network. Keep your contacts informed of your progress, and *always* acknowledge their assistance with a note of thanks.

Though building a professional network can be challenging at first, your efforts will be worthwhile in the long term. And remember: the best time to build relationships is *before* you need them. Good luck!

Taking Charge by Networking

One of the most effective ways to learn is to watch an expert perform a task and then try it yourself. Building a network of experts in fields that interest you will allow you to do that and can help you take charge of your career. You can use a network to explore careers, connect to the job markets, promote yourself and find career support.

Credit: AP Images



Starting a network requires you to:

1. Clarify the interests and commitments in which you are significantly involved. This may be professional fields, areas of knowledge, or issues you have been involved with and want to share.
2. Plan a communication strategy and know what to say when you meet someone new. Practice talking with people you have never talked to before. When you are at conferences or other meetings,

make it a habit to introduce yourself to others and find common interests with the people you meet. If this is difficult for you, watch people you know who are better at meeting others, listen to what they say and then try it yourself.

Building your network happens in many ways. Some ideas include:

1. Develop your online professional profile through the networking site [LinkedIn](#) and join the YALI Network group to meet other young professionals in Africa who share your areas of interest.
2. Organize a [YALI Network face2face](#) gathering of people you know and ask them to invite their contacts whom you would like to know in your community.
3. Make contact with people you would like to include in your network by introducing yourself to them in person, by phone or by letter or email. You can also request an informational interview to learn about what they do.
4. Keep up-to-date with people in your professional community. Include in your network people whom you have identified as individuals it might be useful to know. These can be people inside or outside of your organization. Others may refer people to you whom they consider as likely to fit into your network.

Remember to follow up on your interactions with people in your network with notes thanking them for their time and keeping them informed of your status. Demonstrate that you are genuinely grateful for the conversation and explain how the conversation topic relates to your work. Genuineness and transparency are essential to success in any network relationship.

You also may be interested in [YALI Network and Meetup Everywhere](#) and [Signing On, Linking In](#) on yali.state.gov.
